

Letting it all hang out (or not)

Alison Sharrock

Ovid's love poems hover playfully between fiction and autobiography. Can we ever trust what he says? Especially about his love life?

Italian stallion

'Some guys', complains Ovid, in his work on *The art of love* (or: *How to be a good lover*), 'are always bragging about the number of girls they've laid. Huh! I bet they're lying half the time, tossing the name around for show when they can't toss the girl off for real. Me, I don't brag even about my real conquests, never mind fake – well, not often anyway.'

Hmm.

In the *Amores* ('Love poems'), Ovid's three books of elegiac verse in which he takes on the role of a lover from all sorts of angles, the poet could possibly be open to the accusation of bragging. Although on occasion he is happy to claim – with a straight face – undying devotion to one woman, and even to characterize himself as *not* someone who jumps from one bed to another like a circus acrobat, he is not immune to the numbers game. On one occasion, he blames a friend for bad relationship advice (2.10). His mate, Graecinus, had assured him that it was quite impossible to be in love with two girls at once, something which had lowered his defences, and now – look at him! – in love with two and there is nothing he can do about it. It isn't his fault, of course, he's just so susceptible: so he spends most of the poem celebrating not just each girl's charms but also, and especially, his own massive capacity. 'I want love all the time', he says, 'with one if she's enough, or if not, with two. I can take it. I may be slight, but I'm tough, and no girl has ever been disappointed. In fact, I can spend the whole night on the business and still be strong and ready for action in the morning'. And so he continues, culminating in the hope that his whole life will be one big screw and his death come at the opportune moment. (Scholars who are congenitally addicted to Ovidian links between sex and poetry note that the poet-lover's prayer to 'die' in the middle of the sexual work comes at something pretty close to the exact midpoint of the poetic work, the *Amores* as a whole.)

In another poem (2.4: actually earlier in the *Amores*, but simple chronology is not the only organizing principle for the

collection), Ovid proffers a full-scale confession of sexual excess. He claims to hate the way he is, but not to be able to do anything about it. (Yeah, right!) He is caught by every girl in Rome: tall or short, modest or flirtatious, cultivated or simple, fair or dark, youthful or mature – you name it, he wants it. But before you start thinking 'what a philanderer' or 'what a poseur', there are a couple of things to note. First, there is a level at which this really is all about poetry (honest), and what he's saying (metaphorically) is 'I can do any kind of love poem, for any love object, produced to order'. Second, remember my comment above about taking on/playing out/exploring the role of a lover from all sorts of angles, because the next poem after this piece of braggadocio begins with an apparently heartfelt expression of pain. 'No love is worth it (leave me alone, Cupid), that I should so often pray to die'. The cause of this grief is discovery of infidelity on the part of the one and only beloved. Different poems, different times, different roles.

Metrosexual

Despite all his claims for heroic sexual prowess, things don't always go well. In one poem (3.7), Ovid really does let it all hang out, confessing in graphic terms his experience of impotence. The genre in which he is writing, elegy, is by Roman standards really quite modest and not at all obscene, using euphemistic rather than explicit vocabulary, but nonetheless Ovid makes it quite clear what is going on. The (anonymous) girl tried everything she could, but it was no use, and in the end she decided to give up and go and splash herself with water ('so that her maids wouldn't know that she hadn't been touched'). It's a strange poem, especially in a culture where vulnerability, weakness, and the hurt inner child are hardly something to wear on your sleeve, but in another sense it is only taking to extremes something which lies at the heart of Roman elegy and indeed of much love poetry: unfulfilled desire. At the same time, even the experience of failure can be

an opportunity to brag: Ovid assures us that on previous occasions he had performed 'twice with Childe, three times with Pitho, three times with Libas' and a massive nine times in one short night with Corinna. (If you don't believe this is all at one level about poetry, go and have a look at Catullus 32, and also remember that there are nine Muses.) Moreover, now, as he writes, he is ready for action. Writing poetry and having sex seem to be tied up in his mind.

(Poetic) fantasist

But for all his big talk, much of the eroticism of the *Amores* consists in a refusal of self-exposure, with a veil playfully pulled over the true heart of the matter which readers so often, perhaps inevitably, try to penetrate. Indicative of this is the way Ovid introduces 'himself' and 'love' right from the beginning. Instead of this amazing girl who makes him fall head over heels in love and therefore driven to write love poetry, we see a poet trying to write an epic on a suitably martial topic, when the love god steals away a metrical foot and forces the poet into love elegy. (In epic, every line has six feet, whereas elegy is made up of alternating lines of six feet and five feet.) His complaint at having no suitable subject matter for this metre is answered by Cupid's arrow. When finally, in the fifth poem, we get to an unusual moment of success for the lover and one of the most erotic scenes in Latin literature, Ovid playfully refuses to let us watch: 'who doesn't know the rest?' He also refuses to let us know whether he is really in love, who Corinna 'really is', and whether the Ovid who tells the story is the same as the Ovid in the bed – and/or the same as the one who writes the poem.

So should we be condemning Ovid for bragging? For being hypocritical in complaining about other people bragging? At one level, I'd be quite happy to answer 'yes' to both questions, since one thing I've learned from 25 years of reading Ovid is never to trust him. But let's take a closer look at what he said. 'I talk only sparingly even about my true love affairs, and my mystic thefts are hidden beneath firm faithfulness' (*The art of love* 2.639–40). What is that but a refusal to speak while enticing us into thinking he's telling us something? It is, itself, a kind of

seduction of the reader, tempting us with apparent hints about his personal life. Are those women in the impotence poem – the unlucky girl herself, the previous recipients of Ovid's attentions with their obviously literary Greek names, and Corinna herself – real, fake, or fictional? The name 'Corinna' alludes to an earlier Greek poetess, but it also suggests a generalized meaning of 'girl'. Ovid is constantly playing hide-and-seek over the fictionality or otherwise of his poetic universe. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more explicit than in the poem where he complains about the naive gullibility of readers in taking as truth things which are (really) inventions of the poets (*Amores* 3.12). 'Honestly, how can you believe all that stuff about Jupiter turning into a bird or a shower of gold or a bull in order to seduce some poor girl, or the obvious fiction of part-human monsters, hundred-armed giants, and people turned to stone?' (You should be thinking about the *Metamorphoses* now.) 'Believe that and you'll believe anything – even that I was telling the truth about Corinna!' But there's a rather subtle double bluff going on here. Ovid is complaining that his poetry has prostituted his mistress and that 'she who was just now called mine, whom I alone loved, I fear may be had by many', because everyone knows about her through his books. 'Any sophisticated reader', he remarks sarcastically, 'would have seen that my praise of my beloved was meant to be fictional'. Implication: 'but you idiots took it as truth and so (think you) are sleeping with her'. Hmm. So his claim for the fictional identity of Corinna is put forward as if it were to protect the real identity of a real beloved. Which is the trick?

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